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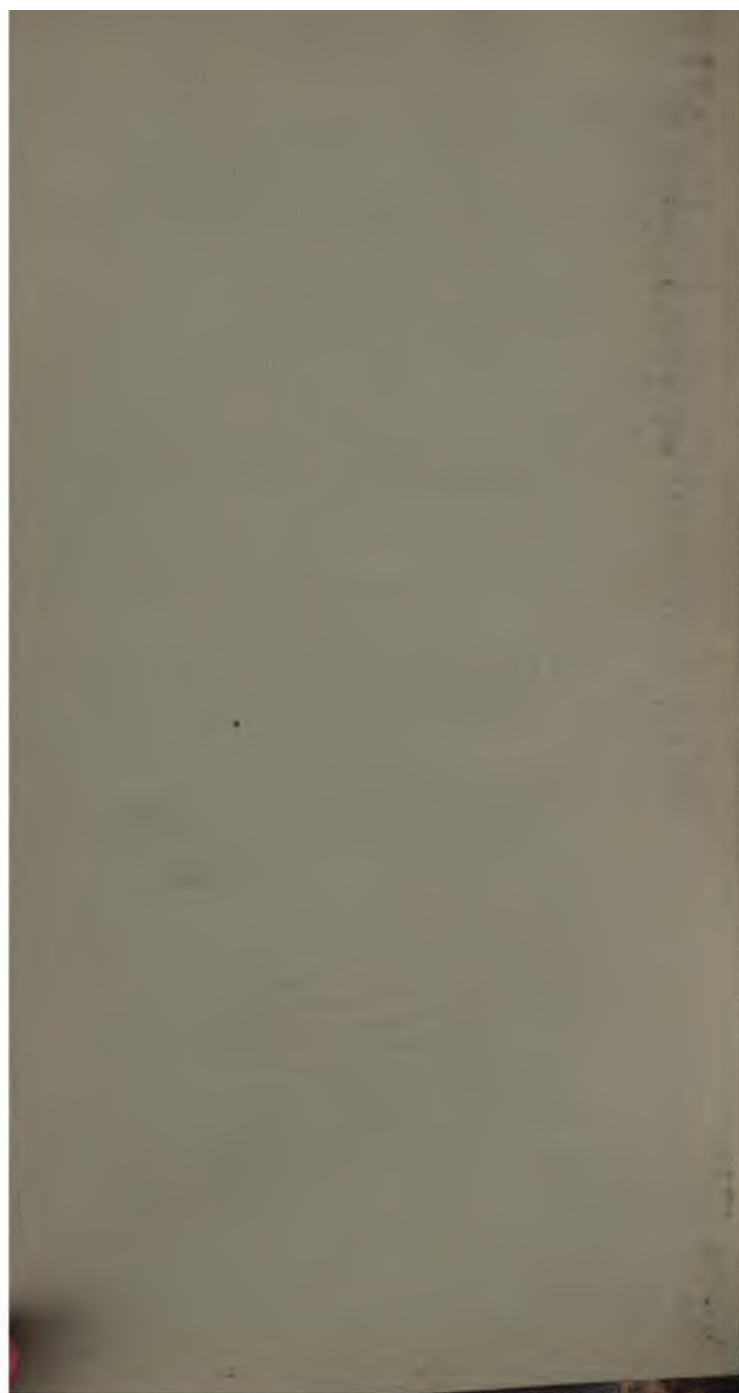
THEIR INTERPRETERS.

By G. VANCE SMITH, B.A.,
THEOL. & PHILOS. DOCT.



37, NORFOLK STREET, STRAND LONDON.

1878.



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THE PROPHETS
AND
THEIR INTERPRETERS.

George
BY G. VANCE SMITH, B.A.,
THEOL. & PHILOS. DOCT.

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PREFACE.

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IN the following pages it has been my purpose to state, or, perhaps I ought to say, to suggest, as briefly and simply as may be, the principles of interpretation which are applicable to the prophetical writings. The illustrative examples are taken principally from the book of Isaiah, for reasons assigned in the last section of the work. A few controversial remarks were unavoidable, but these have been limited to the recent little volume, *The Argument from Prophecy*, by the Rev. Brownlow Maitland, M.A.—a work, I need scarcely add, which the reader would do well to peruse for himself. He would thus have the whole case fairly before him, at least in outline, of what I may term rational historical interpretation *versus* that which is founded upon dogmatic and traditional prepossessions—as, I venture to think, the work just named too largely is.

One other suggestion I would offer to the reader. It is, that he should actually consult the passages of Scripture referred to in the following pages. A mere reference to them as they are quoted here, or perhaps only indicated in a foot-note, is hardly sufficient to exhibit the full force of the arguments and statements made from time to time. Passages appealed to should be read in their own context, and with a due reference to the historical circumstances of their respective authors, so far as these are known to us.

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THE PROPHETS
AND
THEIR INTERPRETERS.

§ 1. THE CHAPTER-HEADINGS.—THEIR MISLEADING
CHARACTER.—ISAIAH XXXV.

THERE can be no doubt that many readers of the Bible are accustomed to take their idea of the prophets and their writings from the headings of the chapters, as these lie before them in our authorised English version. It may be well, therefore, here to recall the fact, that the chapter-headings are no part of the original Scriptures. They are additions to the books made by editors and translators in recent times; intended to indicate the contents, or supposed contents, of each chapter, as understood by such persons. This fact is not, I imagine, very generally known; or, perhaps I should only say, it is not very commonly thought of by ordinary readers. It may be added, that the natural tendency of preachers is to leave it unnoticed, rather than the contrary; and it is easy to understand that the recollection of it might interfere seriously at times with the usual strain of popular exposition.

It is well known, again, by those who have attended to the subject, that when the headings of the chapters are examined and compared with their contents, the most singular instances of incongruity, and of the confusion of one thing with another, present themselves. A promise to King Ahaz* of a child to be born 700 years after his own time is supposed to serve the purpose of encouraging him and his people amidst the devastation of their country by invading armies; a description of the office of Christ as the prince of peace introduces an announcement of the defeat and discomfiture of Edomites,

* Isaiah, vii.

Philistines, Moabites, and Egyptians ;* the future glories of a church which they have never acknowledged are held out to the Jews, as if to mock them with delusive promises in the midst of their calamities ;† their return from captivity is proclaimed along with the preaching of John the Baptist in the wilderness, in such a way that it is scarcely possible to distinguish the one from the other ;‡ the meekness and gentleness of Christ illustrate the terrible roaring of Jehovah as “ a man of war ” against his enemies ;§ the downfall of Babylon, the vocation of the Gentiles, the cursed folly of trusting in Egypt, the scandal of the cross, the damnation of the wicked, the new Jerusalem,—such topics as these alternate with one another in various phrase ;|| the whole forming an extraordinary medley such as could hardly have originated in any sane mind, and which, in truth, owes its existence solely to the inventive genius of ill-judging commentators and writers of chapter headings.

To illustrate these statements a very familiar section of the book of Isaiah may be referred to. It is ch. xxxv., which commences thus :—

“ The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them ;
And the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose ;
It shall blossom abundantly,
And rejoice even with joy and singing :
The glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it,
The excellency of Carmel and Sharon,
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
The excellency of our God.”

It is not necessary to quote the entire passage, in order to ask, what does this remarkable and beautiful description refer to ? According to the statement at the head of the chapter it sets forth “ the joyful flourishing of Christ’s kingdom,” and “ the virtues and privileges of the Gospel.” Who may have appended this piece of information no one knows, and we have no means of finding out. But it is accepted, probably, by multitudes, as a just and authentic account of what the prophet had

* Isaiah xi.

† Isaiah xlix. liv. lx.

‡ Isaiah xl.

§ Isaiah xlii.

|| See the headings or many of the later chapters of Isaiah in particular.

in his mind, in writing the words. Indeed, I once heard an excellent bishop of our Established Church, long since dead, a man of high reputation for his learning, preach a kind of expository sermon upon a verse in this chapter; in which he took it for granted, without hesitation, or any attempt to justify his position, that the whole was a prediction, wonderfully fulfilled in the event, of the establishment of Christ's kingdom, and the success of the Gospel in future times.

But now, to see the true purport of the passage, let us look a little more closely into some of its expressions and into its contents. The last verse, for example, reads thus :

" And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion,
With songs and everlasting joy upon their heads ;
They shall obtain joy and gladness,
And sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

We see at once that the prophet is speaking of a return of his people, or some of them, to their own homes. The wilderness, through which they have to march, he says, shall rejoice and blossom for them as they come. They that are of a fearful heart are told to be strong and fear not; behold their God shall come with vengeance. He will come and save them. There shall be plenty of water for them in the desert. They shall not miss the way. No ravenous beast shall be there to injure them, but they shall come safely back to Zion.

That such is the purport of this passage is apparent from the preceding chapter, with which ch. xxxv. is closely connected, as shown by the language and spirit of the entire passage. Indeed, it is an accepted conclusion with the best authorities, that these two chapters form *one* prophecy and ought not to have been separated. Turning therefore to ch. xxxiv., we there read that the day of the Lord's anger is come. He is about to avenge his people's cause and deliver them from their enemies. The enemies meant are clearly indicated. "My sword shall be bathed in blood. It shall come down upon Idumea and upon the people of my curse to judgment." Again it is said, "For the Lord hath a sacrifice in Bozrah, and a great slaughter in the land of Idumea." The inhabitants of Idumea were the Edomites, ancient enemies of the Jews, and Bozrah was one of their chief

cities. Thus it appears that these enemies were now to be defeated and put to the sword, while the Israelites, whom they had held in captivity, were to be delivered and return safely home, with songs of joy and thanksgiving.

This passage affords one example out of many that might be given of the common and almost wilful misunderstanding of the prophetic books. Misinterpretation of this kind may be said to be the rule among modern preachers and expounders, led away, as they are, and pre-occupied by long established systems of what is called Evangelical doctrine. Under these influences, it is the practice to apply every possible expression to Christ and the Gospel, with little regard to the context or original intention of the words. Thus it would often appear as if the ancient prophets existed mainly for the purpose of saying one thing while meaning another, or of delivering obscure announcements about Christianity which their contemporaries did not understand, which have never been fulfilled, and which it is easy to see never can be fulfilled.

For, let it be observed, when Jesus of Nazareth claimed for himself the character of the expected Messiah (or when this was claimed for him by others), he was a very *different* kind of person from what the Jews of his time were looking for under that title. The ancient prophecies had by no means proved to be a true "preparation" for his advent. His own people, with few exceptions, would have nothing to do with him, but rejected him, and let him be tried for blasphemy and crucified by Roman soldiers. Of what use, then, were all the ancient and elaborate predictions so commonly supposed to foretell his coming? Clearly they did not *answer* their presumed purpose. Nor is it a sufficient reply to this question to say, The Jews of Christ's time were blind, and did not understand their true interests, or know how to interpret their sacred books. The Jews of Christ's time were what the course of their history and the training of providential events had made them; and it is far more likely that our modern expositions of prophecy are ill-founded and often altogether wrong, than that the Jewish people missed the meaning of their own sacred books so entirely as is usually supposed.

§ 2. THE PROPHETIC OFFICE. — THEORY OF A DOUBLE SENSE.

THE correctness of these statements will be seen, if, in the next place, we briefly notice the position of the ancient prophets and their relation to their own age.

These can hardly be compared to anything in our modern life. The prophets appear to have had no defined official position in connection with religion or its public ministrations.* This belonged to the priests. The prophets, on the contrary, came forth only at intervals, when something in the situation of affairs appeared especially to call them into activity; something in the connection of the nation with foreign powers, in the tyranny or other evil conduct of the ruling men, or in the idolatrous practices of the people. At such times it appears to have been open to any earnest man, who felt himself called to the work, to stand forth and lift up his voice as the messenger of Jehovah. Accordingly we find such men as Joel, Amos, Isaiah, and many others, coming forward from time to time to deliver their message of warning, reproof, expostulation to their fellow citizens and their countrymen; seeking in this way to stem the torrent of idolatry and sin, and to bring back erring rulers and people to their proper allegiance to Jehovah, the only true object of their religious reverence.

It is not clearly known in what form their prophecies were delivered, whether they were sometimes spoken in the hearing of those for whom they were intended, or whether they may not sometimes have been first committed to writing, and made known only to a small number of persons, the immediate friends and acquaintances of the prophet. In the case of the more eminent of these men probably both these methods of "publication" were employed. Doubtless, also, the spoken addresses, occasioned by some occurrence or some feeling of the day, were in various instances delivered *extempore*, being afterwards committed to writing, and so transmitted to later times.

* The office of a prophet does not appear to have been confined to those who had been trained in the so-called "schools of the prophets;" of which there is no trace in later times.

It is remarkable that so large a number of these compositions have been thus preserved. For we know that some of the prophets, as for example, Jeremiah, were the objects of frequent persecution to the established priesthood and the courtiers of their day ; and the tradition is that Isaiah was put to death—sawn asunder—by Manasseh. It might have been expected therefore that attempts would not be wanting to prevent their written warnings and reproaches from being circulated, as well as to destroy the chance of their subsequent preservation. Whatever may have been done with this intent, the result has been that no inconsiderable body of the prophetic writings has come down to later generations. How widely they are now circulated throughout the world who can describe or adequately imagine ? Little indeed could these venerable men have anticipated a world-wide diffusion or celebrity such as this. Little could they have foreseen—looking, as some of them did, upon the impending destruction of the very nation of which they formed a part—that it would in a great degree be owing to their own solemn and faithful words, that the name and fame of their people would be preserved as they have been, and diffused for so many centuries throughout the world.

The signification to be attached to the word *prophet* and its related terms is a point which next claims a brief explanation. In ordinary speech, to prophesy is to *foretell* ; and a prophet is one who is possessed of the power of predicting what is to take place hereafter. But an old and genuine meaning of the verb is simply to *speak forth*, to announce, and also to *speak for*, that is to say, for God ; to unfold or interpret the divine will to men. Such is a frequent meaning of the word in the Bible. It thus appears that the old Hebrew signification of *prophecy* does not necessarily include prediction, and it will be found that many of the prophecies of the Old Testament are not predictive, except in the most general sense, such as might be attributed to many a modern sermon. Thus the first chapter of Isaiah is simply descriptive of the calamities which have fallen upon the people, in consequence of disobedience to Jehovah, and of the further punishment which will befall those who do not “ cease to do evil, and learn to do well.” So it is in many other

cases. When predictions occur they are mostly in general terms. Minute or particular prediction of definite events is not common, at all events, although I do not mean to say that it never occurs. It is usually, however, in connection with the actual events and circumstances of the prophet's own time; and most of those expressions, or rather, I ought to say, all of them, which have been applied by New Testament writers to Christ and the Gospel will be found, on examination, to have originally a proper use and meaning of their own in immediate relation to the events and circumstances of the prophet's own time, and to be applicable only in a kind of secondary or transferred sense to the use to which they are put by the Christian writers.

This is so obvious in most of the cases that it has given origin to the idea, formerly more common than it is now, of prophetic passages having two meanings—one, the sense originally connected with the times and circumstances of the prophet; the other, that deeper or more spiritual sense to which his words are shown to be applicable by the later course of events. In reference to this "double-sense" theory, it is hardly necessary to observe that it is the mere invention of speculative theologians. We are nowhere *told* by any biblical writer of its existence, and the facts of each individual case, when examined, will be found to be wholly inconsistent with it. It is more satisfactory, therefore, as well as more in accordance with reason and experience, to think that the prophet, in each case, had *one* definite meaning in his mind, suitable to the persons and circumstances in reference to which he spoke and wrote; and that any later use of his words, as though they were applicable to what came to pass, perhaps centuries afterwards, is simply an *adapted* use, not really contemplated by the prophet himself.*

These remarks require illustration, and this will be found in one of the most interesting passages in the book of Isaiah.

* Comp. *The Argument from Prophecy*, by the Rev. Brownlow Maitland, M.A. (1877), p. 79. This author seems, though with reluctance, to abandon the idea of two meanings.

§ 3. THE PROPHECY OF THE CHILD IMMANUEL.—ITS APPLICATION TO JESUS CHRIST.

IN Isaiah vii. we are told how King Ahaz is alarmed at the prospect of the invasion of Judah by the combined kings of Syria and Ephraim. The prophet goes out to meet him, and seeks to encourage him by announcing that the counsel of his enemies "shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass." He then offers to King Ahaz a *sign*, a definite object in connection with which it shall be seen that the words of Isaiah have been fulfilled. This sign is described in ver. 14; a child is to be born which shall be called by the significant name Immanuel; and before this child "shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land* shall be forsaken" before whose two kings Ahaz was now so terrified. That is to say, before the child shall be three or four years old, the territory of the two hostile kings shall itself be laid waste by an invading enemy, deliverance being thus secured to Judah. The prophet, however, goes on to say, that days of trouble shall come upon Judah nevertheless, arising from an approaching invasion of other enemies, namely, Assyrians and Egyptians—the two great powers which should make Judea their battle-field, and cause the desolation of which the prophet speaks (vv. 17—25).

Now here it is evident that in this prophecy we have words which apply in their immediate intention to the existing circumstances of those times. The country is in present danger from powerful enemies; the prophet desires to give confidence and courage to its rulers and people; and he announces that within three or four years their deliverance shall have come.

In these obvious considerations are clearly involved the primary sense and intention of the prophecy,—in strict application to the actual necessities of the time. The meaning of the child's name, it may be observed, is not "God with us," but "God *is* with us"—in accordance with the usual Hebrew idiom which omits the substantive verb. It signified that God would be with Ahaz and his people,

* The land, that is, of Rezin and Pekah, kings of Syria and Samaria, spoken of as *one* land. The rendering of this verse (vii. 16) in the English Bible greatly needs correction and is barely intelligible.

in delivering them from their enemies. Nearly all Hebrew names are similarly significant; that of Isaiah, for instance, meaning Help, or Salvation, of Jehovah. So this child is to be born, and by its name to indicate that God will be with his people to deliver them.

In the next place, observe the use made of this passage in the New Testament. The verse is quoted there just *as if* the prophet had had JESUS CHRIST in his thoughts, was looking forward to *his* birth and intending to speak of *him*. The first Evangelist, having mentioned certain circumstances attending the birth of Jesus, adds the remark, "Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold a virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son and shall call his name Emmanuel, which, being interpreted, is God with us." This rendering, it must be observed, needs correction: the Greek is not "*a* virgin" but *the* virgin;" and the final words should read "*God is* with us," as before noticed. Thus, then, the Evangelist writes. Nevertheless, there cannot be a question as to what Isaiah really says. It cannot be reasonably doubted that his words referred and belonged, properly and strictly, to his *own* day; that he spoke of a child then to be soon born, and to bear a name significant of the speedy deliverance of his country from enemies then actually threatening it.

The question, however, will still be raised by some, Had the prophet *two* meanings? While speaking of a child to be soon born, in the time of King Ahaz, had he also in his thoughts *another* child,* to be born seven hundred years afterwards? In reply, there is nothing in Isaiah's language to indicate this; nothing to suggest, even remotely, such an interpretation of his words; absolutely nothing to support it. But had the words, then, a meaning over and above that which the prophet *intended*, a meaning hidden even from himself, and only brought to light by the course of events and after the lapse of many centuries? As before, there is nothing whatever in the passage itself to require, to suggest, to justify, such a supposition. And even granting that such a hidden

* This seems to be maintained by Mr. Maitland.—*Argument from Prophecy*, p. 70. It is entirely destitute of evidence.

meaning existed, of what *use* was it? Whom did it enlighten, or encourage, or help in any way? seeing that no one (so far as we can tell) ever knew anything about it, until indeed the unknown writer of the first chapter of Matthew, probably long subsequent even to the death of Christ, applied the words of the prophet to the birth of Jesus? In so doing, that Evangelist evidently *adapts* the words of Isaiah to his own purpose, in accordance with a well-established custom of his day, of which I must now briefly take notice.*

§ 4. USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE NEW.

THE citation and use of Old Testament passages in the New Testament is very common. It appears that the later Jews, and the Christians in particular, were accustomed to quote the words of their ancient Scriptures, and to speak of them as being "fulfilled," in some later person or incident, without any consideration of the original intention or the context of the words so quoted. The following instances will show this.

* It must be observed that the words of Isaiah vii. 14 are incorrectly rendered in the English version. They should run thus: "Behold the virgin is with child, and beareth a son and calleth [or even hath called] his name" &c. The word rendered "virgin" denotes a young woman, whether married or not. Here it may mean the wife of the prophet himself, perhaps one recently married. If such were the case, he might evidently speak with confidence of the name to be given to the child. In two other instances, Isaiah gave his children significant names, in reference to the political circumstances of his time (Shear-jashub, vii. 3, and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, viii. 1). In vii. 14 he may be supposed to speak of the birth of another of his children, using the very word which is employed by the angel in the case of Hagar (Gen. xvi. 11). Thus, clearly, Isaiah is not looking onward through an interval of seven centuries, to a *future* event, but is referring to what, as in the case of Hagar, has *already* taken place. This view of the subject is in agreement with the conclusions of the best modern Hebraists, from Gesenius to Dr. Rowland Williams (*Hebrew Prophets*, vol. I. p. 263; Comp. Cheyne's *Book of Isaiah*, pp. 26, 31). It has recently been held that Isaiah really intended in this passage to speak of the birth of the Messiah, but was mistaken as to the time! What value should be set on a prediction (presumed to be inspired) which was *wrong*, in regard to the event announced, by an interval of seven hundred years? See the article *Isaiah*, by the Sub-Dean of Wells, in Dr. W. Smith's *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 880.

(1) In Romans x. St. Paul brings forward certain verses from the Old Testament to illustrate and enforce his statement that the Gospel was to be preached to all the world, Gentiles as well as Jews. "So then," he writes, "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, have they not heard? Yes, verily, their line* went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world." (Rom. x. 18). This latter verse is quoted from Psalm xix. ver. 4, and it is given in support of the assertion that the *Gospel* was to be preached in all the earth, just as if that were the true purport of the original words. But in the Psalm the verse has no reference to the preaching of the Gospel or anything else. The words are spoken of the *heavens*, which "declare the glory of God," and the firmament which "sheweth his handiwork." "*Their* sound," the Psalmist says, "is gone out into all the earth, and their words to the end of the world," declaring the glory of God. Here we have a simple case of *accommodation*, the Apostle adapting the Psalmist's expression to his own purpose, and making it confirm his position that the Gospel is to be preached throughout the world. Whether he really thought the words had a prophetic meaning, and referred in some way to the preaching of the Gospel, does not appear. But he uses them as if such were the case, and in so doing he well illustrates the way in which the Old Testament is often applied in the New.

(2) A second instance occurs in Acts ch. i., in connection with Judas. The writer of this book reports that Peter, referring (ver. 16) to Judas, said "It was needful that the Scripture should be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spake before by the mouth of David;" and then, having spoken of the man's miserable death, he adds, (ver. 20), "For it is written in the Book of Psalms, Let his habitation be made desolate, and let no man dwell therein; and his office let another take." Here the words of two Psalms are put together. But it is easy to see that in their original contexts they have nothing to do with Judas. The Psalmist in both cases is calling down curses upon his enemies in a very un-Christlike

* English version, probably meaning the *chord* of a stringed instrument, and therefore the *sound* from it.

manner. Ps. lxxix. 24, 25, "Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold on them: Let their habitation be desolate, and let none dwell in their tents." Ps. cix. 8, "Let his days be few, and let another take his office." In both cases, it is clear, the writer's enemies are intended; but the words were thought to be suitable to the case of Judas; they were therefore "fulfilled" in him, and so the Apostle quotes them exactly as if they had been intended by the Psalmist to refer definitely to him, "For," he says, "it is written in the Book of Psalms."

(3) Another case of the same kind is found in John xix. 36, where it is related how soldiers came and brake the legs of the two malefactors. "But," it is added, "when they came to Jesus and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs." Two verses later the Evangelist writes, "These things were done that the Scripture might be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken." There are three passages to which these words may possibly be referred: Exodus xii. 46; Num. ix. 12; Ps. xxxiv. 20. In Exodus and Numbers the passover lamb is spoken of. This the people are to eat in their houses, leaving none of it till morning, "neither (it is said) shall ye break a bone thereof." In the Psalm we read, "many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivereth him out of them all: He keepeth all his bones, not one of them is broken." The words in the Gospel are not an exact quotation, nor is it possible to say which passage it is that the Evangelist had in his mind. It is certain, however, that in none of the cases is it possible to think that Jesus Christ, or the future Messiah, was contemplated by the Old Testament writer; while yet the words are introduced precisely as if *this* had been the end and purpose for which they were primarily written. Thus, it appears, an Old Testament passage, if it could in some way be applied or adapted to later incidents or persons, might be said to be "fulfilled" in them, whatever may have been its original design or meaning.

From this fact it easily follows that the original purport of an Old Testament passage is to be determined, not by the application or use made of it by later writers, but only by its own immediate connection with the historical circum-

stances in reference to which it may have been written. The principle thus established has been already applied to Isaiah vii. 14. Other cases in which it appears are easily found. There is, for example a beautiful passage in the Gospel of Luke (iv. 16—22), where we are told of Jesus that he went into a synagogue, and began to read in the book of Isaiah the words which occur at the beginning of ch. lxi. At the close of his reading "he began to say unto them, This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears." A slight examination of the prophet's words shows us that this can only have been said by the kind of accommodation of which I have been speaking. The prophet (in ch. lxi.) is writing, not of any personage like Christ, who was to live and be prominent in the world many centuries after his own time, but of the deliverance of his people, then captive before his eyes, or at some time to be so. They shall return home, he says, to rebuild the waste places of Jerusalem, and restore the temple worship on Mount Zion. The prophet speaks in his own person, as one appointed to announce these tidings to his fellow exiles, "to proclaim liberty to the captive, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound." Such expressions were, however, applicable in a certain degree to the spiritual deliverance announced by Christ. They are therefore taken up and used by him in reference to himself, as if they had been designed to refer to him in the intention of the prophet. In some sense, they were "fulfilled" in this application; but it is plain we have here again a case of adaptation, nor is it possible, with a reasonable regard to all the circumstances, to consider it anything else.

§ 5. NEGLECT OF THE CONTEXT AND OF HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS BY INTERPRETERS OF THE PROPHETIC WRITINGS.

MODERN expositions of the prophecies present two very marked features, which must not be passed over without special notice. (1) Passages from different books are put together, as if they formed originally one continuous paragraph, relating to the same subject; (2) the context and the historical circumstances of the prophet are often entirely left out of sight.

Curious examples of both these faults will be found in the little volume before referred to. From this work it would almost appear as if anything will do for a prophecy of Christ; as almost anything may serve for its fulfilment. Thus we have an elaborate continuous paragraph* formed of words taken from Joel, from Isaiah, from Zechariah, and other books, quite as if all were written in the same spirit, at the same time, and in reference to one and the same subject. Yet an examination of each of the passages thus strung together shows that such an assumption is entirely false. Joel for example (ii. 28), writing about 800 years B.C., announces to his people, that after they have repented of their sins they shall be restored to the divine favour. This shall be seen, he says, in the return of their lost prosperity, and in the gift of the spirit which shall be poured out upon them, so that free men and slaves, young men and old, shall be filled with it. The prophet goes on to speak of the wonderful signs which shall accompany this; and informs his people that among other things they shall see the slaughter of their ancient enemies, "The Lord shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem;" "Multitudes, multitudes," shall be cut down like corn before the sickle, "in the valley of decision;" and thus Egypt, Edom, Tyre, and Sidon shall bitterly expiate the violence they have formerly done to the children of Judah. In all this, or such as this, is it possible to think that Joel was looking forward to the days of Christ, to the establishment of the kingdom of God on the earth, and the reign of the Prince of peace? Similar remarks apply to the same author's quotations from Isaiah,† in which it is clear that what the prophet is speaking of is not the coming of Jesus Christ or the promulgation of the Gospel, but the restoration of the Jews to their own land, with the prosperity and glory of the nation, and the increase of its numbers and wealth, which are to follow their return home.

Another instance in which the same extraordinary

* Maitland, *Argument from Prophecy*, p. 55.

† From Isaiah xlv., xlvi., xlix., chapters which probably belong to a period 200 years later than Joel.

forgetfulness of the context occurs is found in Jeremiah xxiii. 5, 6. The passage is not cited in the New Testament, but this circumstance does not prevent our orthodox expositors from applying it to Christ on their own authority. "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, when I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a king shall reign, and act wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely, and this is the name whereby he shall be called, Jehovah [is] our Righteousness." (Jer. xxiii. 5, 6.) The chapter heading informs us that this refers to Christ: "Christ shall rise and save them." Accordingly, great authorities* take the words as a prophecy of the days of Christ, and not only so, but they will tell us that Christ *is* Jehovah, because of the name by which the promised deliverer is to be called. Such is the easy argument which satisfies our popular theologians! But such statements are perfectly fallacious. For, in the first place, as before noticed, the passage is not cited in the New Testament. There is not, therefore, even the show of authority for *applying* it to Christ, which such a use of it might seem to afford. Secondly, the prophet is speaking of a deliverance of his people which was *soon* to come, a deliverance of captives out of the "north country" (ver. 8), referring to persons who had been carried away by Assyrian or other enemies. The name which is given to the deliverer, "Jehovah [is] our Righteousness," is similar to the name given in the same prophet (xxxiii. 16) to Jerusalem: "This is the name by which she shall be called, Jehovah [is] our Righteousness." The meaning of the two contexts is, that both the promised leader and the city shall be safe and prosperous under the protection of Jehovah.

All this abundantly appears from the context in each case. But, as already observed, expositors of this school can dispense with the context, and the less said about it the better. Assyrians, Egyptians, Edomites, the invasion of Judea by barbarian hosts, the misery of the inhabitants

* Dr. Liddon, *Bampton Lectures*, Lect. II. Maitland, *Argument from Prophecy*, p. 76.

and their captivity, the wickedness of rulers, the anticipation of happier times for the Jews, and the destruction of their enemies, with a multitude of similar topics which crowd the pages of the prophetic writings, such subjects are constantly left out of sight, the text being expounded without any proper regard to them. At the same time everything is brought forward which by any possibility can be turned, figuratively or otherwise, into a prophecy of Christ, or of events and incidents in his career. Thus, in effect, the prophets are largely *misrepresented*. Meanings which will not bear examination are put upon their language; and ideas of their office and character are diffused which tend seriously to the perversion of Christianity itself, so far as it is in any way implicated in such expositions. And all this, it must be added, is mainly owing to persons who, like the authors last referred to, profess to be the especial friends and guardians of the Bible, the especial expounders and defenders of evangelical truth!

Very singular results, in the distortion of the meaning of passages, sometimes arise from the neglect of context and of historical considerations above spoken of.

It was once the writer's fortune to hear a very popular preacher explain what he considered the prophetic design and import of the fiftieth chapter of Isaiah. This was done with the usual disregard of the considerations necessary to sound interpretation, but with a result which for the moment was both effective and startling. By an ingenious process, the preacher showed that the passage was in effect a prophetic foreshadowing of the deity of Jesus Christ, as well as of the lowly and suffering life which he was to lead on earth as the Messiah.

The reasoning by which this turn was given to the prophet's words was very much as follows:—In ver. 3 we read, "I clothe the heavens with blackness and make sackcloth their covering;" while in ver. 6 we have these words, "I gave my back to the smiters and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting." Now here, it was said, we have the same person introduced as doing what we are well assured only the Almighty can do; and also as doing and suffering what is possible only to a human

being. In the one place, therefore, the speaker appears as the Creator and Ruler of the world; in the other, as a suffering man, doing the will of God on earth, and bearing the indignities which exasperated enemies and persecutors were permitted to inflict upon him. Here, then, you have manifestly *ONE* mysteriously set forth for contemplation in the character of *God* and *man*, a God-man; and whom can the prophet have had in his thoughts but that great personage of whom the Christian Gospel speaks as the "Word made flesh?"—who both did mighty works on earth such as God alone can do, and also literally gave his back to the smiters, and hid not his face from shame and scorn. Thus it is plain that you have Christ in his Divine power and his suffering human weakness placed before you; for by this conclusion alone can you explain and harmonize the conflicting statements here made of one and the same person.

The case thus made out appears at first sight to be a complete one, and would no doubt so appear to a popular audience; but the whole statement, nevertheless, is entirely fallacious. To see this, and to gain a just idea of the purport of the passage, it is necessary to refer briefly to what is probably familiar to many of my readers, namely, the conclusion of the best modern authorities respecting the age and authorship of this portion of Isaiah.

This part of the book, from ch. xl. to the end, is known by sure internal characteristics of language and historical allusion, to have been written in the latter years of the Babylonian captivity, a period which lasted for the greater part of a century between five and six hundred years before the birth of Christ. During this long interval a large number of the Jewish people and their leading men were living away from their own land, from Jerusalem and its temple, which, indeed, now lay in ruins. They were living either scattered as captives, many of them perhaps as slaves, among their conquerors; or else in small communities of their own; able probably to meet together for some form of religious worship, and subject, it may be, on the whole, to less of hardship than often fell to the lot of vanquished races, in those ancient and barbarous times. But still they were captives, cut off

from their own country, which most of them were never to see again. Many, we know, remained true to the religion of their fathers, and clung to the hope of returning to their own land and restoring the temple worship. Others are believed to have fallen into the idolatrous religions of those among whom they lived;* and these faithless Jews would most probably cease to be Jews, and be absorbed and lost among the heathen races around them.

This state of things, the exile, the sufferings of many, the grief and the longing of all the better part of the captives for their native home and the worship of Mount Zion, are, as we might expect, frequently alluded to in certain parts of the Old Testament; as, for example, in many of the Psalms, and several of the later prophets—"O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever? Why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?" Thus writes one of the Psalmists, and the prophet Jeremiah with wonderful pathos exclaims, "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people." This he says, looking forward to the then impending catastrophe, and ascribing the misery of his people, as the prophets constantly do, to their own unrighteousness and their idolatrous forgetfulness of Jehovah.

But with all their evil-doing, Jehovah had not cast them off for ever. This is proclaimed to them by different prophets, among whom none is so remarkable as he who may be termed the Later Isaiah, the composer of the latter part of the book so called; a portion of Scripture distinguished alike for its varied poetical beauty and eloquence, and for the words of devout hope and trust with which the writer seeks to revive and sustain the drooping spirits of his people, and encourage them to look forward and prepare for the approaching hour of deliverance and the toilsome march homewards through the wilderness.

These brief details will enable us to put the chapter

* See probable allusions to this in Isaiah lvii., lix., lxi., lxvi., *passim*.

more immediately under notice in its right place, and to read it with some degree of knowledge of the person who wrote it, and the circumstances in reference to which he was speaking.

The prophet begins by declaring, in very figurative terms, that Jehovah has not arbitrarily abandoned his people. "Thus saith the Lord, where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away?" Here, as often elsewhere, the relation between Jehovah and the nation is expressed under the image of that between husband and wife; the individual Israelites, again, being sometimes conceived of as the children. The question then is equivalent to the assertion that they, the children, have no document or writing of divorcement to produce as evidence that Jehovah has put away his chosen people, to show, that is, that He of His own arbitrary will has sent them into captivity and given them up to their enemies. The figure sounds strange to our ears, but it is easily explained. Under the Mosaic law divorce was dependent upon the mere will of the husband. He had simply to give the wife a writing of divorce, as evidence of the separation, and the tie was broken. But such, says the prophet, has *not* been the conduct of Jehovah towards the Israelites. Nor has He sold them, as a man might his slaves, to any of his creditors in discharge of a debt. It is their own obstinacy, their own sins, that have brought about their ruin. They have refused to listen to former warnings (ver. 2); there was no man there to answer when Jehovah called upon them by the mouth of his messengers. They were deaf to such appeals, as though He were no longer able to redeem them or deliver them; He at whose rebuke the seas would be dried up and the rivers turned into a wilderness; He who can clothe the heavens with blackness and make sackcloth their covering. (vv. 2, 3.)

Thus far, the prophet has represented Jehovah Himself as speaking, and rebuking the perverseness of His people. But now, changing his manner, he begins abruptly to speak in his own person. "The Lord God (he says) hath given me the tongue of the instructed, that I should know how to speak a word in season to the weary." He then (v. 6) refers, we may understand, to the opposition

and persecution he has met with from some of his fellow exiles, and expresses his own determination (v. 7) to deliver his message, in spite of the hard treatment he has undergone. He is confident that Jehovah will deliver him and those that follow him; while they who oppose shall reap the fruits of their evil deeds, and shall lie down in sorrow. Thus, it is clear, the prophet speaks first in the name of Jehovah, or, in other words, introduces Jehovah as the speaker, and then, without notice or explanation, speaks for himself in his own person. Abrupt transitions like this are frequent in the biblical style; and it is consequently unnecessary, and purely arbitrary, to seek to account for the change in this case by the extravagant supposition before alluded to; to say that Christ is the person present in some obscure and incomprehensible way to the prophet's mind—spoken of in one verse as doing what none but the Almighty can do, and in another verse as suffering what only a man can suffer, and being, therefore, as it is expressed, both God and man. Evidently, it is no such thing. It is not Christ, but the prophet, who, speaking of and for himself, uses the words noticed; and it is only the strange and misleading exigencies of artificial theological systems that lead men to pass by, or blind them that they cannot see, the simple natural import of these and similar forms of expression.

For such expositions of the prophetic writings there is but little excuse in these days. Those writings have for the most part been so fully explained by the patient labour of successive investigators, these chapters of Isaiah in particular have received such abundant illustration at the hands of such scholars as Gesenius and Ewald, that it is inconceivable how any person with mind duly awake to the claims and interests of Divine Truth can stand up from time to time and, in apparent ignorance or positive neglect of the surest results of modern learning, can give utterance to such readings and interpretations of these ancient books as we sometimes hear of. One of these popular expositors, whose name has long been familiar to the religious world, in utter ignorance, it would seem, of the conditions essential to the understanding of his subject, has from time to time gone about the country, and week after

week is still in the habit of standing up to announce to the multitudes who come to hear, his own fanciful and baseless application of the words of "prophecy," making it speak, at his own sweet will, of modern politics and scientific inventions, the downfall of the Papal power and the end of the world—subjects of which there is surely no trace in these books, provided only they are read according to those principles of reason and common sense which no one hesitates to apply to other ancient writings.

The Bible, in truth, for all its readers, is far more a book of the past than of the future. It does not show us so much what is to be, as what *has* been—containing many examples of good and evil, of right and wrong feeling and action, of the great wrongfulness and misery of sin, as of the beauty of justice and holiness—all there for our instruction, if we will only ourselves attend to it. Thus, the book may effectually help, not indeed to unfold to us the heights and depths of Divine Providence in the future destinies of the world, but to promote and stimulate our spiritual life and growth. The Future, indeed, also, in one sense, is there laid open before us. We read in various forms of expression that "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap;" and that "God will render to every man according to his deeds." This the Bible does tell us concerning the future, and it contains for each man no more solemn or weighty announcement. This great lesson respecting both past and future, without doubt it sets before us in manifold ways; but it does not tell us, and never professes to tell us, anything about our particular outward condition in coming years; nor will it tell us in what state our country will be, whether war shall then rage in the earth, whether existing principalities and powers shall be overthrown, the Jews restored to their own ancient home, and the Pope or the Sultan dethroned from among the reigning sovereigns of the world. Such things as these it will *not* tell us, and those who would allege that it does so, who, in the face of all the light which modern learning has shed even upon the dark places of this sacred volume, would tell us that it does so, and would lead their disciples to place *such* a reliance upon its words, they, we may be

well assured, are but as "blind guides." The influence of such teaching and preaching tends seriously to check the progress of sound knowledge in connection with the Bible, and to inspire multitudes with the most fanciful and superstitious ideas of its character. At the same time it provokes the incredulity and scorn of many others, and so in the result robs the book of much of its rightful value and usefulness in the world. Such facts are little creditable to the intelligence of the great religious bodies around us; and well shall it be for the cause of religion, which doubtless they have at heart, when a more just and delicately truthful spirit shall be seen, even in the critical and literary treatment of these so long and so widely misused writings.

§ 6. ISAIAH IX. 6.—"UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN."

OF these remarks it would be easy to offer many additional illustrations. Among these the following is especially worthy of consideration. Isaiah ix. 6: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonder, Counsel-giver, Mighty God, Father of Duration, Prince of Peace." This verse is not applied to Christ in the New Testament; but here again the modern expositor does not hesitate so to apply it on his own authority. Thus Dr. Liddon, for example, speaks of the passage as "that great prophecy, the full and true sense of which is so happily suggested to us by its place in the Church services for Christmas day." In this prophecy, the same writer proceeds to observe, "the 'Son' who is given to Israel receives a fourfold name. He is a Wonder Counsellor, or Wonderful above all earthly beings; he possesses a nature which man cannot fathom; and he thus shares and unfolds the Divine mind. He is the father of the Everlasting Age, or of Eternity; he is the Prince of Peace. Above all, he is expressly named the Mighty God." Thus Dr. Liddon,* but how

* Bampton Lectures (ed. 1868) p. 87.

arbitrarily all this is said, how entirely without authority from the words of Isaiah, a few very simple considerations will abundantly show.

Reading the words as we ought to do, with the immediate context in viii. and ix., it is easy to see that the prophet is speaking, as before, of the events and circumstances of his own day. He addresses the people around him, and tells them not, in their distress, to have recourse to familiar spirits and wizards, but to God only. He had just spoken of an invasion by the Assyrians, who shall come, Isaiah says, with their hosts and overflow the land as a river. The people shall be "hardly bestead and hungry;" in their despair "they shall look upward and curse their king and their God;" and when they look to the earth they shall see only trouble and darkness.

But better times are in store for them. The darkness and vexation shall not (the prophet says in ch. ix.) be such as they were on some previous occasion, when the land of Zebulun and of Naphtali and the district called Galilee were the chief sufferers. Of that former invasion we know nothing certain, beyond this brief reference to it. But what follows is clearer. "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light." This is probably said in reference to the future—as not unfrequently in the prophetic writings, past tenses are used of what is future, perhaps to denote the certainty of the event. Hence the words may be intended to announce the coming deliverance of the suffering people, with the increase of their numbers and their happiness: "They joy before thee (the prophet says) as with the joy of harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil," even because God has broken the yoke of their burden, and the rod of the oppressor.*

These expressions connect the prophecy with what was then taking place or was shortly to do so; and they show us that the child born, the son given, upon whose shoulder the government shall be, was a child of *that* day. It may have been some young prince of the royal family of Judah, to whom the prophet was looking forward, and under whose wise and righteous adminis-

* In Is. ix. 3, it is necessary to correct the rendering, and to omit the word *not*: rendering "and increased its joy."

tration prosperity and peace, freedom from foreign enemies and faithfulness to Jehovah are to prevail in the nation.

Many authorities find the fulfilment of the prophecy in Hezekiah, the son of King Ahaz,* who was at this time a child, or a youth, whose reign was a prosperous one on the whole. If this be so, then, in the epithets Wonder, Counsel-giver, Mighty God,† and the rest, we have a kind of compound name, given, not actually perhaps, but only prophetically, to the child, and like the other significant names before mentioned, it was intended to inspire confidence in the people, and make them look forward to days of peace and security under Jehovah's protection.

But there is yet another way of understanding this obviously difficult and obscure prophecy. This refers it, not to a definite prince of that time, but to a great deliverer to come, in short, to the Messiah, whose advent the Jewish people expected through many ages. Accordingly, here too, as in ch. xi., we have the prophet's anticipation, not indeed of Jesus Christ, born more than 700 years later, but of one who should fill the part of a mighty hero and prince; who by divine help should prevail over the enemies of his people, and establish for them a long enduring kingdom of peace and justice. This interpretation of the passage must be admitted to be highly probable; and if it be correct, it reveals to us the kind of Messiah expected by this prophet. It shows us too that his anticipations were materially affected and coloured, as was natural, by the political circumstances of the times in which he lived, and that they were not really fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We know, in fact, that the Jews of later times were not led by these prophecies to anticipate a Messiah like Jesus Christ. They had not learnt that He that was to come should be a man of

* So Dr. Rowland Williams, *Hebrew Prophets*, I. pp. 272-3, and many other expositors of the highest class.

† This long compound name should follow the analogy of Immanuel, and be written untranslated—Peleh-joetz El-gibor Abiad Sar-shalom. *El-gibor*, rendered "mighty God," means simply "mighty hero." The word *El* is used of Nebuchadnezzar, in Ezek. xxxi. 11, where it is rendered "mighty one" in the English version.

sorrows, one that should be rejected and despised by his own people. This, it is true, the disciples learnt in time by the teaching of events; but yet it is certain, from many expressions in the New Testament,* that it *had* to be learnt by hard experience, and was not the lesson which was drawn in the first instance from the prophetic books. Even the prophets, it would appear, amidst their ardent anticipations of the future deliverer, failed to foresee the true character of his work, as well as the exact time of his coming. It was left, in short, in the very largest degree, to the course of events and circumstances, to enlighten the people and their rulers as to the future purposes of Divine Providence concerning them.

Nevertheless, many of the prophetic expressions were *applicable*, more or less, to Christ, or in the ancient phrase, were "fulfilled" in him. This we have seen in several instances; and the passage now before us presents another example to the same effect. At the beginning of this chapter (Isaiah ix.), words occur which in their original connection referred to the distress and suffering of the nation, arising from an invasion by the Assyrians. We have there also the confident promise of Isaiah that this evil time shall pass away. The calamity shall not be so great as it was on a former occasion, when Zebulun and Naphtali were afflicted, and the region about the Lake of Galilee. The people of these districts are to see a great light, rejoicing in their deliverance and their coming happiness. These expressions are applied in the New Testament to the ministry of Christ. In Matthew iv. we read how he, leaving his native Nazareth, came and dwelt in Capernaum, upon the shores of the lake, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim, that is to say, in those very districts spoken of by the prophet. The inhabitants of these parts were therefore the first to receive the light of the Gospel, and hence to them, too, the words of Isaiah, spoken so long ago in reference to a totally different subject, had a certain fitness. Accordingly, we read (Matt. iv. 13-16) that Jesus "came and dwelt in Capernaum upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim; that it might be *fulfilled* which was spoken

* See the next section of this Tract.

by Esaias the prophet, saying, The land of Zabulon and the land of Nephtholim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people which sat in darkness saw great light, and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up." The words are not quoted very exactly, but there is no doubt that the evangelist refers to this passage; and it is plain he *applies* the words to the ministry in Galilee only in a kind of secondary and adapted sense, and, like Dr. Liddon, he does so without any kind of warrant from the original Scripture for so using them.

§ 7. QUESTION OF A SUFFERING MESSIAH.
ISAIAH LII. 13—LIII. 13.

APART from the application in the New Testament of certain Old Testament passages to the death of Christ, there is no sufficient evidence to show that the Jews of his day or the earliest Christian disciples had expected a suffering Messiah.* In fact, humiliation and defeat were altogether inconsistent with the popular and long-descended Messianic idea, which spoke only of a great deliverer who was to rescue his people from the power of their oppressors and give them in their turn the empire of the world. In the New Testament this temporal conception is clearly apparent in various instances;† and we cannot doubt that it tended strongly to bring about the rejection of Jesus at the hands of his countrymen. One so lowly, so destitute of political power, so little capable of restoring the fortunes of the nation, could not be the mighty and victorious leader whose coming was foreshadowed by ancient prophecy. Hence the rejection and destruction of the prophet of Nazareth; and it was not until *after* these results had come to pass that his followers

* On this point Mr. Maitland expressly observes, "It is certain that, at the time in which Christianity arose, the expectation of a triumphant and glorious Messiah had gained almost exclusive possession of the Jewish mind."—*Argument*, p. 116. On the question above referred to, the reader is referred to Professor Drummond's work, *The Jewish Messiah*, in particular chapters xxii., xxiv.

† Mat. xvi. 21, 22, xx. 21, 22; Luke xviii. 31-34, xxii. 24-30, xxiv. 21, 25, 26; Acts i. 6, 11.

were led to apply to him such passages as Isaiah liii., and to find the words of the prophet "fulfilled," even in the ignominious death of him in whom they had believed.

It is evident, however, from various expressions in the Gospels, that Jesus himself looked forward to the event of his own death. This appears from such passages as Mat. xvi. 21; xvii. 23; Luke xxiv. 25-27. But from the same expressions it is equally clear that the disciples did not readily enter into such declarations; that they had not therefore by any means been prepared for the idea of a suffering Messiah, and that this idea was in fact strange and unwelcome to their minds. Moreover, it should always be remembered, as an important element in these discussions, that the Gospels were written many years subsequently to the death of Christ, at a time when no doubt it had long been the practice to *apply* Old Testament language to that event, as in Acts viii. 31, 32. But there is nothing in the New Testament to show that such expressions were thus applied previously to the event, so as to prepare the way for its acceptance as a part of the Messianic idea. There is nothing to show this, but much to the contrary.

At any rate, the application of passages like Isaiah liii. to the crucifixion and its attendant incidents was inevitable. It was clearly to be anticipated, considering the way in which Old Testament passages are used by the Christian writers—as abundantly shown in the preceding pages. Assuming, however, as may well be done, that this section of Isaiah (lii. 13—liii. 13) did not in its original intention contemplate Jesus Christ, the inquiry still remains, What does it refer to?

This question is more easily asked than answered; and the limits of this Tract do not afford space for even an outline of the different views which have been held on the subject. In truth it would appear that we do not possess sufficient knowledge of the history and circumstances of the writer, or of the persons for whom he wrote, to speak with any confidence as to his immediate purpose in this section of his prophecies. He lived, as we have seen,* not less than from five to six hundred

* *Supra*, § 5, for a brief notice of the well-established conclusion of modern criticism, to the effect that the later chapters of Isaiah

years before Christ, in an obscure and unhappy period of his people's history. It should not therefore be surprising, if expressions are now met with, the purport or the application of which it is not easy to understand. But yet here, as in other cases, attention to the context will do much to suggest the probable solution of the problem.

The prophet is speaking of, and to, his people in their captivity. He announces their restoration to their own land. There, he tells them, they shall re-establish the temple services, and eventually, shall be the means of spreading the knowledge of Jehovah through the earth (ch. xlix.). In the earlier part of lii. we have some of these anticipations repeated. A messenger shall bring to Jerusalem the tidings of the return :—

"How beautiful upon the mountains
Are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings,
* * * * *

That publisheth salvation,
That saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth."—(lii. 7.)

Then the prophet reverts to the place where he and his people now are, and calls upon them to come forth out of the idolatrous city :—

"Depart ye, depart ye, come ye out from thence,
Touch no unclean thing ;
Come ye out of the midst of her,
Be ye pure who carry the vessels of Jehovah.
* * * * *

For Jehovah shall go before you,
And the God of Israel shall guard your way."—(lii. 11, 12.)

These expressions occur immediately *before* the section under consideration. In the verses immediately following it we find the prophet still upon the same theme. He calls upon Judea, now depopulated and barren, to break forth into singing, because its inhabitants are about to be multiplied beyond all former bounds by the speedy return of the captives (liv. 1—11). When, therefore, we thus find him immediately *before* and immediately *after* the section we are noticing, speaking of circumstances and events then about to occur, are we to suppose that all at

(xl.—lxvi.) are not from the pen of Isaiah, but from a prophet whose name is unknown to us, who lived nearly 200 years later than Isaiah, towards the close of the Babylonian exile.

once, in the midst of these expressions, abruptly, and without any apparent occasion, or any notice to his readers, he sends his thoughts far away, five centuries or more in advance of his own time, and goes on mysteriously to speak of the life and death of Jesus Christ? of one who had no sort of traceable connection with the existing state of affairs, and the introduction of whom in this way could do nothing, and so far as can now be known, did nothing, to encourage the captive people, or lead them the better to face the labours and hardships of the long journey homewards through the desert? Such a supposition seems to be simply incredible, and may be dismissed as affording no true solution of our problem.

The "servant" (lii. 13), or "servant of Jehovah," here and elsewhere spoken of, cannot then reasonably be supposed to denote the future Messiah, Jesus Christ, or any personage who was to appear centuries after the prophet's time. Indeed, there appears to be ample evidence in this book of Isaiah itself as to what the term "servant" was intended to denote. The word occurs in places where its import is not doubtful. Thus:—

"But thou, Israel, art my servant,
Jacob whom I have chosen,
The seed of Abraham my friend."—(xli. 8.)

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
Mine elect in whom my soul delighteth."—(xlii. 1.)

"And he said unto me, Thou art my servant
O Israel, in whom I will be glorified."—(xlix. 3.)

These and other such passages show us that the "servant of Jehovah" is the collective Israel, especially (we may understand) the more faithful part of the people in captivity, who are to be the means of giving safety and honour to the whole nation.* With these the prophet sometimes identifies himself (as he sometimes also identifies himself with Jehovah), speaking in his own name when he is really speaking in behalf of others.† These considerations afford a clue to the probable explanation of this passage (lii. 13 — liii. 12), and of some related passages.

Having, in the preceding verses of lii., spoken of the

* Compare Isaiah xlii. 1—9, xliii. 8—15, xliv. 1—5.

† xlix. 1—4.

coming restoration of the captives, the prophet goes on to contrast their past helpless and despised condition with their approaching prosperity. Speaking for Jehovah, as he often does,* he says: "My servant shall act wisely (or shall prosper), he shall be exalted and extolled," whereas he had been an object of wonder in his misery, "his visage was so marred, more than any man's (as it is figuratively expressed)—"he shall sprinkle many nations," (or more exactly, he shall cause many nations to spring up with astonishment); "kings shall shut their mouths at him," in amazement, that is, when they see the prosperous return of the captives and their re-establishment in their own land. This part of the section is predictive; the tenses used are appropriately futures; but they change to preterites (lii. 14, liii. 1), as soon as the suffering condition of the people is referred to. And so it is, very regularly, throughout liii. But "who," the prophet proceeds, "hath believed our announcement?" and then he goes on to describe—not, be it observed, in terms of *prediction*, but in those of *history*, as one speaking of something past† —the former sufferings of the exiled Israel. Thus the people are here conceived of collectively as Jehovah's "servant," who has been despised, wounded, oppressed, cut off from the land of the living, though he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. But in these sufferings there was an expiatory efficacy—in accordance with the ancient belief that suffering fell upon men in punishment of sin, whether their own sin or that of others connected with them. Thus then the afflictions of the servant of Jehovah had, and would have, an atoning virtue. They should serve to "justify many;" "he bare the sin of many, and he made intercession for the transgressors."‡

* As, for example, in Isaiah i.; *supra* § 5.

† This fact is too much overlooked; but an examination of the leading tenses of the Hebrew will show that what is here said is fully borne out. Mr. Cheyne's rendering gives a similarly historical character to the passage.

‡ Again, in confirmation, I refer to Mr. Cheyne, who observes, "The 'many' and the 'transgressors' are evidently the Jewish exiles, on the analogy of similar expressions in an earlier paragraph." —*Isaiah*, p. 193.

It is only, I venture to add, those who can shut their eyes to the historical exposition of this passage that will be satisfied to find in it a description of the last scenes in the life of Christ—a description consciously so *intended* by the Hebrew prophet. The references to it in the New Testament are in accordance with the practice of the early Christian writers. *After* the event of the crucifixion, they found various passages in the Old Testament which might be referred to the case of their crucified Master, although they had not known this before. An evangelist expressly says, in reference to their ignorance, “they understood none of these things.”* Everything indeed in their sacred books which seemed to correspond to the events and characters of the primitive Christian history, they were ready to consider as “fulfilled” in those events and characters. Yet still it is true, here as elsewhere, that this later application of ancient expressions is made only by way of *accommodation*, and that the primary meaning is to be found in the original circumstances to which they relate and in the context from which they are taken, not in the later or Christian application of the words.

§ 8. ABSENCE OF DEFINITE PREDICTION IN REFERENCE TO CHRIST.—TRUE CHARACTER OF THE PROPHETIC WORK ILLUSTRATED FROM ISAIAH.

A CONCLUSION of much importance, and one that will surprise many readers, follows from the preceding considerations. It is that in none of the cases that have been examined is there any sure instance in which an ancient prophecy can be said to have referred definitely to Jesus Christ, or to one who, in character, work, and spirit, was to be such as he was. This conclusion is, of course, affirmed only of the Scripture passages which have been examined. But the passages in question are among the most important of the kind—they are the most important of the kind—in the whole Bible. These cases therefore raise a strong presumption that what has been found in them will be equally seen in every similar case which occurs; and that each individual case, when duly

* Luke xviii. 34, Mark ix. 32.

investigated in its own context, and in connection with its own historical circumstances, so far as these are known to us, will yield exactly the same result. Such indeed is the simple truth, and it follows as before that it is by a kind of accommodation only, and in a certain secondary and adapted sense, that Old Testament passages are applied to Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and said to be "fulfilled" in Him.

In saying this, however, let it be observed I am very far from intending to affirm that the prophets did not anticipate a future time of national prosperity and peace, and the wide diffusion of the Jewish religion. It cannot be doubted that, in various instances, they did so. But it does not appear that they looked forward to a point of time so long after their own as that of Christ, or to a definite personage *such* as he proved to be. The Messiah expected by the Jews of old, under the influence and training of their own sacred books, was a very different character from Jesus of Nazareth. This may be seen, for example, in Isaiah xi., in which there can be no doubt that we have a Messianic passage. Here, after telling us that the great Assyrian forest shall be cut down (close of ch. x.), the prophet proceeds to say (xi. 1) that there shall come forth a shoot out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. This prince is to be a wise and able ruler; he shall give peace and prosperity to his people; he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and slay the wicked; he shall be girded with righteousness and faithfulness; further, he shall conquer the ancient enemies of his people, and reduce them to submission—Moabites, Edomites, Ammonites, Philistines, and Egyptians; he is to reunite the divided kingdom of the Hebrews; and bring back the dispersed captives of the nation "from the four corners of the earth."

Such sayings as these have no real application to the Founder of Christianity; have never been fulfilled in any intelligible sense in *him*; and so it is in each separate case, when it is carefully and fairly examined.

The position, then, now arrived at is, in substance, this. The prophets spoke with immediate and special reference to the persons, events, and circumstances of their own times; and always with the most undoubting

faith in Jehovah, as the protector of His people. Their great object was to apply religious and moral principles to the practical affairs of life as they actually lay before them. This fact, indeed, it is which often makes it exceedingly difficult to understand the drift of what they have written,—their allusions to actions and events being at times obscure and perplexing in a high degree. At the same time, while this is true, there is usually no room for doubt as to the animating spirit of the prophets. It is always a deeply religious spirit. They stand forth as the representatives of Jehovah—true prophets, speaking ever for Him. The earnestness or the enthusiasm which impels them is of His inspiring; and it must be confessed, by any one who will read the prophetic writings with attention, that their usual tone is one which eminently corresponds to this description.

Of all the prophets, Isaiah is, perhaps, the one in whom this elevated tone and quality are the most exemplified. He lived more than 700 years before the birth of Christ; but, as already pointed out, there are conclusive reasons for holding that he was not the author of the *whole* of the book which is named after him. The first twelve chapters formed, in all probability, the original nucleus of the collection; and these chapters closely correspond, in language and allusions, to the age and circumstances of the prophet—the period of the great Assyrian invasions. To this nucleus most probably belonged the title with which the first chapter commences (v. 1); and to this may have been added, in later years and later generations, prophecy after prophecy—some of these being from the pen of Isaiah and some of them not so;—until the whole collection was formed as we now have it. The latter portion of the book, from ch. xl. to the end, is, as we have seen, with the utmost probability to be assigned to a prophet, who may be called the later Isaiah, and who lived nearly two centuries after his great predecessor, in the captivity of which he writes. As in the Psalms and the Proverbs, several different sections or minor collections are easily distinguishable, and it is impossible to suppose that all of these, in either book, are from one hand, or even one age, so it is with the prophecies classed under the name of Isaiah.

On this point I need not further dwell. I will only add, let any one take the first twelve chapters of this book, the genuine and undoubted production of the prophet Isaiah; let him read them, in a fair translation, with ordinary care and intelligence; let him remember that they come down to us from a point of time more than 2500 years from that at which we now stand; and I should expect he will not fail to acknowledge not only the remarkable force and often beauty of the language, but also the high character of the moral and religious sentiment which pervades these chapters. It is this latter quality, I need not add, which gives them their present and abiding value, more than anything which they contain of the predictive character. This, indeed, is hardly to be found in them, except only in connection with the immediate circumstances in which the prophet lived.

The first chapter of the book abundantly illustrates these statements. The nation, it is there declared, has forsaken Jehovah; the land, therefore, is lying desolate. It has been overrun by an invading army; Jerusalem itself, "the daughter of Zion," is left standing indeed, but in a devastated country, like an abandoned hut in a vineyard when the vintage is past. After this description of the condition of the land, Isaiah calls upon the rulers to put away the iniquities which have been the cause of these evils. The forms and ceremonies of their ordinary worship, sacrifices, and new moons and Sabbaths, these are not what Jehovah asks from them, nor will this kind of ritualism win back for them His lost protection. For this they must put away the evil of their conduct; they must learn justice, well-doing and mercy, and then, perhaps, their sins will be pardoned, and their departed prosperity return to them. If they are willing and obedient they shall eat the good of the land; if they are not, they shall be devoured by the sword.

Such is the usual tenour of these prophetic warnings, denunciations, and promises—suffering, on the part of the people, the consequence of transgression, affording the occasion, succeeded by the prophet's call to penitence; then the promise and anticipation of happier times, in which again we have evidently the germ of the later and more definite Messianic idea.

Thus, I may now in conclusion observe, Isaiah affords us a typical example of the prophetic character. It is mainly for this reason that he has been selected for especial notice in the preceding pages. The limits of this tract will not allow me to pursue the subject at greater length, by introducing further examples from other prophets. But the one that has been given will suffice for all the rest. It will be found, I repeat, in each case, when separately examined, that the same general considerations are applicable which have been found to hold in reference to Isaiah. A due regard to the historical circumstances of each prophet and of his times will show us that his thoughts were entirely occupied with the persons around him, with their conduct and fortunes, and those of their rulers; and that even when his mind may be looking forward into the future, it is the future as it lies immediately before him with which he is mainly, or perhaps exclusively, concerned. Thus, as before, it can only be in a secondary and adapted sense that the words of the prophets and psalmists are transferred to the distant times of the New Testament, and applied to Christ and the incidents of the early Christian history. In *each individual case*, when duly investigated, this general statement will be found to contain the only conclusion warranted by a fair and reasonable consideration of the facts.

Many readers will resist or resent this conclusion, and deny its truth, perhaps without much care to investigate the grounds on which it is made. Others will lament it, even while they feel it to be true, and even though they may give it an unwilling acceptance. One vital consideration applies to us all alike, which is that of our allegiance to the Truth. It is our duty to find out and to welcome the truth, whatever it may be, in this question as in others; nor can we for a moment imagine that anything else can, in the result, be beneficial to our fellow men, or acceptable before Him who is the Lord of Truth.

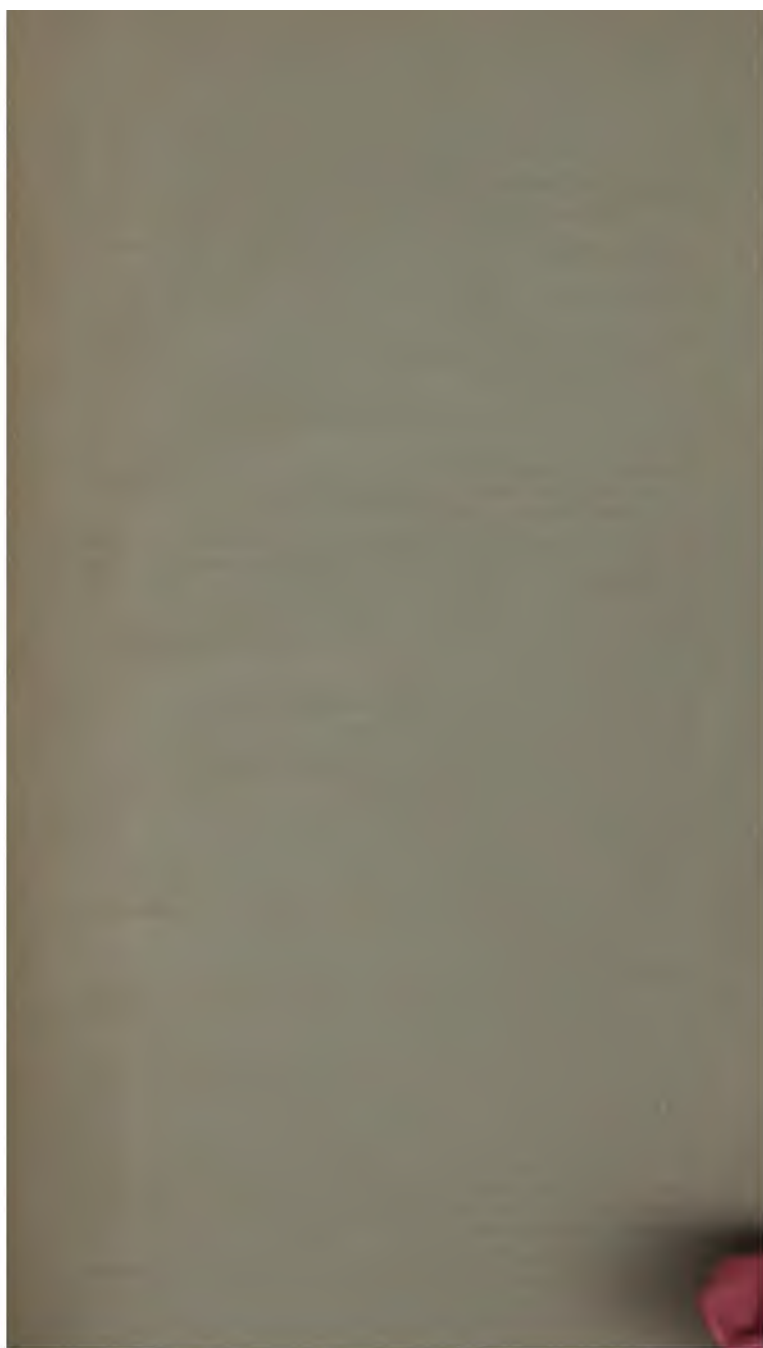
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